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ABSTRACT

To bridge the gap between producers of parenting materials and potential users, the National Institute of Education funded the Southwest Educational Laboratory to design, develop, and research the effectiveness of a model Parenting Materials Information Center. During the last 2 years this model has been developed to include more than 1400 materials about parenting, parent education, and parent involvement for parents of normal and exceptional children. The current collection consists of the actual materials and information sheets which contain information about the materials, including descriptors covering areas such as subject matter and availability. The collection of information sheets can be searched by manipulating a set of plastic cards on which indexing information is stored. An important characteristic of the system is that it can be replicated and requires minimal advance training to use. (Author/LS)

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FOCUS ON PARENTS: THE PARENTING MATERIALS INFORMATION CENTER

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The importance of parent involvement and participation in educational, social service, health, and welfare programs has been clearly stated in the regulations and guidelines for many federally-funded programs. The actual forms that these roles take in theory and in practice vary considerably. The current practices of programs involving parents can be placed on a continuum which represents increasing levels of involvement. Each level requires a greater amount of information, materials, and resources to be performed effectively. The availability of this information to properly trained personnel and the back-up resources required, determine the effectiveness of the actual program. Briefly, the levels of participation can be described as follows:

a) informed consent - where parents are told in general what the program is expected to do for or to them and their children. Here the options for active participation are mostly nonexistent, that is, no active participation in the program by parents.

b) unpaid volunteer - where parents perform activities that are meant to free teachers and other professionals to devote their time to more "professional" tasks. This type of involvement, although valuable to the program, does not often result in any significant benefit to the parent. The types of activities include preparation of instructional materials, custodial care, chaperoning field trips, decorating, etc. In some exceptional cases the special skills of parents are used (art, performing, cultural or language information, etc.)

c) paid staff member - where parents are hired for fixed amounts of time to perform paraprofessional tasks. This level represents a greater commitment because of the

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monetary benefit, the possbility of learning valuable skills, and having access to a career ladder. The tasks performed are similar to those of volunteers, but there are greater chances for formal training.

d) decision-making body member - where parents are called to participate in deciding type of programs, elegibility requirements, priorities, acquisition of materials, hiring of personnel, etc. Parents make an important part of the program's Advisory Committee.

e) learner - where parents are the actual focus of the programmatic efforts, or at least of a significant component. The types of learning involved can range from parenting skills to self-enhancement, career or occupational contents, survival skills, etc.

Each of these roles can be performed by the same person at different times or by different people at the same time in a given program. Each role places an increasing burden for information, both on the part of participants and program personnel.

Regardless of the model chosen to interpret the reasons behind educational failure, parents have been mentioned as a key element in the solutions (Stearns & Peterson, 1973). The programs implemented have often assumed that no change in the child can be lasting without the aid, support, and reinforcement from the family, and that changes can spread to other members of the family and the community at large (Gilmer et al, 1970; Gray & Klaus, 1969; Garfunkel, 1970). The various types of programs which include a significant parent component have been classified into Parent-Oriented, Children's Programs with Parent Component, and Omnibus Programs (Lazar & Chapman, 1972). The information and skills that have been transmitted are as varied as the strategies used to deliver them. They range from home teaching of academic concepts (Niedemayer, 1969; Nimnitch et als.,

1971) to teaching specific parenting skills (Karnes, 1969; Levenstein, 1971, Gordon, 1971).

As a result of these programmatic efforts, the need for parenting materials has increased considerably. In an assessment of the situation in the areas of early childhood and parenting in particular, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's Early Childhood Division found that although a large number of materials and programs existed, they were of uneven quality, comprised of a variety of media (although largely printed), and known and used primarily by the originators at local sites (Context Analysis, 1973). It was clear that as training programs for parents and carepersons increased, information about these programs needed to be widely diffused so that program development would not be duplicated and so that training programs could benefit from materials and procedures already found to be effective.

In order to work towards a solution to this problem, in 1974 NIE funded SWRL to design, develop, and research the effectiveness of a Parenting Center Model in disseminating information about materials dealing with parenting skills and concerns. During the last two years, the model has been developed to include materials in the areas of Parenting/Parent Education/Parent Involvement. This model is referred to as the PARENTING MATERIALS INFORMATION CENTER (PMIC).

The current collection consists of the actual materials collected plus Information Sheets prepared for selected materials. The bulk of the collection deals with the parenting of normal children, but it also includes some materials covering the special needs of parents of exceptional children.

The kinds of materials included are directed primarily to the general public, and deal with applications of research findings (the how to's) more than with the research itself (the why's). Materials represent a variety of commonly used

formats which range from printed materials to audiovisual and multimedia kits. Prices range from free upon request to several hundred dollars.

In its present stage of development, the PMIC has acquired the most up-to-date collection of parenting materials available. A continuous search process guarantees the comprehensiveness of the collection in the face of an accelerated rate of production of materials for/about parenting. This increase closely follows a higher level of awareness about the importance of effective parenting. Schools, federal, state and local projects, private institutions, and foundations have become increasingly more active and supportive of parenting programs and concerns. This increased interest in working with parents can be better served when the currently existing instructional resources are known and used, thus reducing the time and effort now devoted to material development usually by people who are not always well equipped to do it effectively. There are enough common traits among parents in different parts of the country to justify a thorough search for existing materials before embarking on development of materials at the local level. On one hand, a current and continually updated PMIC can save considerable time and effort to program planners and practitioners. On the other hand, a thorough examination of existing materials can uncover areas of urgent need where materials can and should be developed. The various combinations of subject matter, format, treatment or approach, and target audience can assist educators and professionals in the vital task of providing instructional materials better suited to the needs of adult learners.

The basic operations of the PMIC consist of searching for, acquiring, and analyzing materials that fall within its scope. Once an item or piece of material is acquired, catalogued, and assigned a shelf location, it is then analyzed and entered into the system. The process of analysis consists of two closely related tasks. First, there is the assignment of all the index terms that apply to the material, including

descriptors for content, physical and functional characteristics, age level of the subjects whose behavior or characteristics are discussed, target audience, language and availability. The second task consists of writing an objective, non-evaluative narrative description of the material which presents the most important information in a logical sequence. The narrative description includes a statement of purpose, the specific contents covered, the organization of the material, and any other characteristics relevant to the use of the material. Thus, the information generated from materials acquired, takes the form of a collection of documents-Information Sheets-and the indexing of this collection of Information Sheets using the approximately 270 index terms which cover the most important characteristics of materials. This indexing permits a search of the collection for materials having a specified set of characteristics that are important to the user.

The Index Terms available for use can be grouped into several types of characteristics. They are:

a) Content - the subject matter covered or discussed in the material.

b) Specific Format and Other Characteristics - the physical appearance and use of the materials.

c) Age/Developmental Level - the age group of the individuals whose behavior or characteristics are discussed or covered by the material.

d) Primary Target Audience - the groups or kinds of users for whom the material was developed.

e) Language, Availability and Reading Difficulty - the language used, alternative ways of obtaining the materials, and reading difficulty levels.

The Major Content Areas are grouped in terms of a common focus. Parenting involves the relationships between parents and their children, but there are many other aspects associated with this function. The five groups of Major Content Areas

represent broad areas of interest. They are:

a) Focus on Parent-Child Interaction. These Major Areas contain materials dealing with relationships that exist between parents and their children, from the time of pregnancy to their socialization into the family. Also included is Child Abuse, which constitutes a deviation of the normal parent-child relationship.

b) Focus on the Child's Development. These Major Areas cover the traditional topics of child development, including Health and Safety. The topics here focus on the child, his behavior and development.

c) Focus on Education. These Major Areas cover a complete range of educational concerns. They include Early Childhood Activities and Academic Contents, but also Discipline and the all-inclusive Large Scale Programs.

d) Focus on Individual Differences. These Major Areas deal with the broad range of exceptionalities and with cultural/ethnic minorities.

e) Focus on School and Community. These Major Areas deal with relationships between parents and the institutions and organizations designed to serve them.

The information storage and retrieval system utilized by the PMIC makes use of the principles of Optical Coincidence and Coordinated Indexing. Materials are represented as specific locations on a 100 X 100 matrix. For each characteristic or descriptor used in the indexing language, a 10 X 12 inch plastic card is prepared with holes drilled only in the positions corresponding to materials that meet that characteristic. Any number of cards can be used, one for each term included in the indexing vocabulary. At this time, over 270 Descriptors are used in the PMIC. A search is accomplished by manipulating the cards representing desired characteristics and superimposing them against a backlighted stand. Any

material in the collection having all the characteristics corresponding to the cards chosen will appear as a beam of light (optical coincidence). Each beam of light can be read as a code number corresponding to a material in the collection. With that code number, the Information Sheet about the material can be located.

The most important characteristic of the current prototype PMIC is the possibility of replicating the entire system in as many locations as needed for a fraction of the cost of developing the system. This replicability is based on the assumption that in most cases it is unnecessary to have the actual material at hand to determine its potential usefulness for a given program. The prepared Information Sheets contain sufficient information to give users insights as to the suitability of material for their needs. The PMIC can extend the range of information available to a local Resource Center to include the more than 1,400 materials currently indexed. The complete prototype occupies a desk top and requires minimal advance training to use. Lay persons including parents and paraprofessionals can be trained in one session to use the system.

The goal of this project is to provide an information retrieval tool to planners, implementors, and participants in programs involving parents, so that the utilization of human and material resources can be maximized. The information stored by the PMIC and available in the form of a replicated system, can increase the speed and accuracy with which programs can respond to local needs and priorities and it will also facilitate the individualization of services provided to parents and children.

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